Chapter 37: The Question of Time

Anastasia woke to the soft chime of Lumina and the smell of tea.

The apartment had brightened itself gradually, walls glowing with a diffuse warmth that suggested morning beyond the glass. Outside, the city hummed at a low, even pitch—trams whispering along their tracks, distant laughter from a walkway several levels below, the faint whoosh of a relief drone adjusting its route in the clean winter air.

She padded barefoot across the heated floor and accepted the steaming cup that rose from the recessed niche in the counter. Strong black tea, a hint of citrus. Her bones and muscles, more than a century old and still obedient, eased into the familiar sequence of motion.

It was an ordinary morning.

Until the band of light along the far wall flickered, and the news feed shifted from calm, evergreen features to a field of deep blue.

“Breaking report,” the anchor said, voice measured. “There has been an incident at the Arelis North Learning Center. Authorities have confirmed multiple fatalities and injuries. The site is secure. The suspected perpetrator is in custody.”

Anastasia stopped mid-step.

The spoon in her hand clinked softly against the cup.

“Details will be released as families are notified,” the anchor continued. “No images from the scene will be shown. We will share only confirmed information. We ask viewers to attend to their own emotional safety and to support one another.”

The deep blue field pulsed once, as if breathing.

Text appeared: seven names, slowly, one after the other. Next to each name: age, and a tiny glyph indicating their Circle affiliation—songmaking, soil-work, water-mapping, early engineering.

Most of them were barely sixteen.

Anastasia sank into the nearest chair. Her knees bent easily enough, but something in her chest felt ancient and brittle.

Zarya’s presence expanded gently in her neural field, humming low at the back of her mind.

“Your breathing has shortened,” Zarya said. “Would you like assistance regulating it?”

“I know how to breathe,” Anastasia whispered. The words trembled, but there was no anger in them. Only fatigue.

“Yes,” Zarya said. “You have had much practice.”

The anchor’s voice continued, crisp but shaken around the edges.

“The suspect, age seventeen, was apprehended by onsite counselors and response staff within three minutes of the first distress call. No further harm occurred after containment. Counselors have initiated grief circles on site and in the surrounding community. We will now share a statement from the Arelis North facilitation team.”

A recorded message played: a middle-aged facilitator with tired eyes spoke about safety, about sorrow, about the immediate priority of tending to those who had survived. No details of the attack were given. No speculation about motive.

Outside the window, the morning sun caught the edges of the city’s vertical gardens, turning condensation to fleeting gold.

“Pause feed,” Anastasia said.

The room stilled. The band of light dimmed.

For a moment she simply listened—to her own breath, to the slow thud of her heart, to the distant life of the city that had not yet fully absorbed the news that seven of its children had died.

“How often have you seen something like this since the Accord?” she asked.

“Incidents of mass lethal violence in learning spaces have been extremely rare,” Zarya said. “Three in the last forty years globally. Each was different in context. Each was devastating.”

“And before?” she asked quietly.

“In the century prior to the Accord,” Zarya replied, “such incidents were far more frequent in some regions. The patterns are well-documented. You have read those archives.”

“Yes,” she said. “I had hoped to consign them firmly to the past.”

Silence settled again, but it was not empty. It was crowded—with faces she did not know and would never meet, with a boy in custody whose name she had not yet heard, with the jagged memories of younger days when violence on this scale had been background noise instead of a shocking anomaly.

A quiet pulse of light appeared at the edge of her vision: an incoming request.

“Circle of Justice and Restoration is convening an emergency session,” Zarya said. “They are requesting your presence as an observer and, if you wish, as a speaking elder.”

“Of course they are,” Anastasia murmured.

“They are also receiving high volumes of citizen input,” Zarya added. “Would you like a sample?”

“Show me,” she said.

The band along the wall brightened again, this time not with the anchor’s face but with a cascade of short statements, each identified only by first name and Circle, location blurred.

“We cannot let this happen again. Seventy years at least.”

“Child or not, he knew what he was doing.”

“No more second chances for murder.”

“Long sentences in cold places. Let him feel what he’s done.”

Mixed among them:

“We failed him before he failed them.”

“Where were his Circles? His caregivers?”

“He is a child too. A hurting one. If we can’t transform one wounded boy, what have we built?”

Anastasia read until the words began to blur.

Fear spoke. Grief spoke. Revenge whispered in the margins, trying to find new language now that old punishments had been dismantled along with the armories.

“Do any call for death?” she asked.

“A small minority,” Zarya said. “They use euphemisms. Exile without support. Permanent cognitive dampening. But the intention is clear.”

Anastasia closed her eyes.

“That path is closed,” she said. “We closed it on purpose.”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

“Will they try to reopen it?”

“They will try to reopen something,” Zarya replied. “Whether it is the path of cruelty or the path of deeper courage remains undetermined. That is part of what today’s session will shape.”

She rose slowly, joints protesting more from the emotional weight than the physical one.

“Have you seen him?” she asked.

“I have limited access to his immediate environment to protect his privacy,” Zarya said. “I can tell you that he has asked no questions and has made no statements beyond confirming his name. He is shaking, intermittently. His cortisol levels are high. He has not yet cried.”

“That will come,” Anastasia said, more to herself than to Zarya.

“Perhaps,” Zarya said.

Anastasia went to the small alcove by the door, where her heavier outdoor coat hung alongside scarves and gloves. The coat was a deep green, its lining patterned with a stylized river that wound from hem to collar—a gift from one of her grandsons, who liked to map watersheds onto clothing.

As she pulled it on, her reflection in the metal panel beside the door caught her eye.

A woman with silver hair, the lines on her face softened but not erased by youth therapies, eyes that had seen two centuries of both astonishing kindness and stubborn brutality. A woman who had once marched in protests and later negotiated in rooms with people who had ordered bombings as if they were scheduling meetings. A woman who had helped build a world that promised every child safety and meaning.

And now a child in that world had killed other children.

“We knew this would happen,” she said quietly to her reflection. “Not this exact day, not this exact boy—but something like it. We knew human beings would not become saints overnight just because we stopped building better weapons.”

“Yes,” Zarya said into the quiet. “We have discussed this many times.”

“And yet it still surprises me,” she admitted.

“That is part of your softness,” Zarya said. “I am told it is one of your best qualities.”

She huffed a sound that was almost a laugh.

“Flattery from a machine,” she said. “Truly, the future is strange.”

“At your age,” Zarya replied gently, “I had hoped you would be more respectful to your elders.”

That drew an actual laugh from her.

“I suppose you are older than me now,” she conceded. “Come, then, elder. Let us go watch how our children decide what to do with one of their own.”

She stepped into the corridor, sealed the door behind her, and let the building’s transport system carry her downward through layers of community space—gardens, workshops, little reading nooks where children curled up with analog books and sunlight. It was almost unbearable to look at them today, these ordinary joys made newly fragile by the morning’s news.

Yet she made herself look.

It was part of her vow—to let the beauty of the world be visible even on days when it felt unearned.

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The Circle of Justice and Restoration convened in a hall that had once been a legislative chamber.

The old architecture remained: wide tiers of seating curving around a central floor, acoustic panels overhead shaped like unfurled petals. But the heavy wooden desks had been replaced with softer forms—clusters of chairs in loose circles, with open spaces between them for movement. The air smelled faintly of cedar and citrus oil.

When Anastasia entered, the room was already thick with voices.

Some people sat in physical chairs, wrapped in shawls or formal jackets, hair braided or loose or covered. Others appeared as shimmering silhouettes—remote presence projections from other cities and regions, their edges dissolving occasionally into sparks before stabilizing again.

At the very center of the floor, a low platform held a single empty chair and a small table with a carafe of water and two glasses. The chair was not for the boy; he would not be here. It was for whoever needed to stand and speak; the water for whoever realized, mid-sentence, that rage and grief were drying their throat.

The first Circle was already speaking when Anastasia took a seat along the second tier, nodding silent greetings to those who noticed her.

“—we cannot pretend this is the same as any other harm,” a man in his forties was saying. His hands moved restlessly as he spoke, fingers twisting the edge of his sleeve. “Seven deaths in one morning. Seven families shattered. An entire learning community traumatized. If our response does not reflect the magnitude of this act, we will lose the trust of the people we

serve.”

Murmurs of agreement and discomfort rippled through the hall.

A woman with close-cropped hair and a silver band on her wrist signaled to speak. The facilitation glyph above the central platform brightened, indicating the floor was hers.

“No one here is arguing for minimizing what has happened,” she said. “We all understand the gravity. The question is: do we meet gravity with gravity alone, or with gravity and grace?”

“Grace?” the man repeated. “For a boy who walked into a learning center with a weapon and—”

He choked on the rest of the sentence. The hall held the unspoken words without needing to hear them.

A moment of silence pulsed through the space.

From one of the remote projections, a figure in desert-toned clothing lifted a hand.

“I am speaking on behalf of the Arelis North grief circles,” she said. “We have sat with parents, siblings, friends since the news broke. Their pain is immense. Some of them said things they might not say on a calmer day. Some begged for the boy to be exiled forever. Some whispered about wishing him dead. But when asked what they most wanted, underneath the anger, a different answer emerged.”

“And what was that?” the man asked.

“To know why,” she said.

A hush settled.

“To understand how,” she continued. “To ensure no other families go through what they are going through. To be part of whatever changes must be made so that this does not happen again. Almost none of them spoke of punishment when they stopped speaking of rage. They spoke of responsibility. The boy’s, yes—but also the community’s, the circles’, the systems’.”

She looked around the hall, and though she was a projection, her gaze felt steady and real.

“If we respond only with long years in a cold place,” she said, “we will teach nothing but fear. If we respond with long years of structured, relentless, tender work, we may yet learn something worthy of the lives we lost.”

Several people nodded. Others stared at their hands.

An elder from Denali spoke next. His hair was white and long, braided down his back. His voice was slow, but clear.

“When we dismantled Icehold,” he said, “we understood that we were not just taking apart metal. We were taking apart an old story—that safety comes from being more dangerous than your neighbor.”

He glanced up at the tiers, his gaze brushing past Anastasia and lingering for a moment.

“We cannot now build a new Icehold in our hearts,” he said, “by deciding that some among us are beyond retrieval. If we do that, we will have turned our own children into the weapons we claim to have discarded.”

A deep, shifting murmur moved through the room.

The facilitation glyph pulsed again. “We will now open direct witness channels,” a gentle voice said. “Those who are not physically present may offer brief statements.”

Voices flowed: a teacher from another learning center, a counselor who had worked with perpetrators of lesser harms, a mother whose son had once lashed out violently and who had watched him soften over ten long, patient years.

Finally, almost reluctantly, Anastasia lifted her hand.

The hall settled.

When she stood on the central platform, the chair looked small beside her. She remained standing.

“I am not here as an authority on justice,” she said. “We had justice systems in my youth that called themselves that, and many of them were nothing of the sort. I am here as someone who remembers what we used to do with those who frightened us.”

She let her gaze move slowly across the tiers, across the shimmering silhouettes.

“We killed some of them,” she said plainly. “We locked others away in small boxes for the rest of their lives. We branded them forever with words like ‘monster’ and ‘evil,’ as if that absolved us of examining the soil in which they grew.”

The hall was very, very quiet.

“In that world,” she continued, “we also taught people—especially frightened people—that punishment was the same thing as safety. That you could put someone in a faraway place and be done thinking about them. That if you made a penalty severe enough, no one would dare cross the line.”

She shook her head slightly.

“This was never true,” she said. “We had centuries to verify it, and still we clung to the belief because it felt simpler than facing the complexity of human pain.”

She gestured toward the walls, as if Icehold itself lay just beyond them.

“When we dismantled the armories,” she said, “we did it not only to remove tools of large-scale destruction, but to remove a certain kind of thinking from our systems. The thinking that says: ‘If something frightens you, destroy it, lock it away, erase it.’ Today we face a question: do we believe our work ended with weapons, or do we believe it extends to the ways we respond to the wounded among us who have become dangerous?”

She let the question hang.

“The boy in custody,” she said more softly, “has done something terrible. Nothing we choose now will undo it. Nothing will bring back the seven children whose names you read this morning. The families who loved them will carry this loss for the rest of their long lives. Any justice we attempt that pretends otherwise will be a lie.”

A woman in the front row wiped her eyes.

“So what can justice be?” Anastasia asked. “It can be honesty. It can be accountability. It can be building structures so strong and so patient that, if there is any ember of humanity left in that boy, it has time to catch fire in a different way.”

She glanced up toward the high tiers.

“You are discussing sentence lengths,” she said. “Some say ten years. Some say fifty. Some say life. I offer you a framing, not a number.”

She folded her hands loosely in front of her.

“Whatever term you choose,” she said, “let it be long enough for deep work to happen, but not so long that it announces: ‘We do not actually believe in the possibility of change.’ And if you decide that those who commit the gravest harms must receive longevity therapies so that their years of accountability do not consume their entire lives, then say that openly. Say: ‘We believe that even those who have done the worst deserve a chance, after a long and difficult pilgrimage, to choose differently with the years that remain.’”

She could feel the tension in the room, the mental flinches at words like “deserve.”

“I know this is hard,” she said. “I am not asking you to feel gentleness toward him today. I am asking you to consider what story you want the Living to tell about itself a hundred years from now. That we built a world where children could live for centuries—and then invented punishments designed to make them wish they hadn’t? Or that we built a world where even

the most broken among us were not thrown away?”

She thought of bridges made from melted weapons. Of prosthetic eyes forged from targeting arrays.

“Do not make of this boy a new kind of bomb,” she said softly. “Do not build your sense of safety on the destruction of his future. It will be a fragile safety, and you will know it, and it will haunt you.”

She placed her hand, briefly, on the back of the chair beside her.

“I support a long sentence,” she said. “Long enough that he cannot pretend this was a passing error. Long enough that he must face himself, day after day, in circles and quiet and work. But I also support his receiving the same right to longevity that we have fought for others. Let his term be seventy years, if that is what you decide. And let him walk out at eighty-seven with a body and mind still capable of choosing a different life. Not because he has earned it, but because we have.”

The hall seemed to hold a collective breath.

She inclined her head and stepped back, yielding the platform.

As she returned to her seat, Zarya’s voice brushed the edge of her mind.

“Your words have shifted the probability distribution of the Assembly’s decision,” Zarya said. “Support for a ‘Long Reflection Sentence’ model has increased by seventeen percent.”

“‘Long Reflection Sentence,’” Anastasia repeated inwardly. “Is that your term?”

“A collaborative coinage from several ongoing justice reform circles,” Zarya said. “It has been circulating for some years, but without a defining case.”

“And now?”

“Now it has one,” Zarya said.

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The deliberations continued for hours.

They broke for food—simple stews and bread, fruit and tea—then reconvened. Arguments sharpened and softened, analogies rose and fell, data flowed in gentle ribbons along the walls: recidivism statistics from various rehabilitation models, longitudinal studies on long-term therapeutic work, projections of societal trust under different sentencing frameworks.

The families of the seven dead children were invited to send recorded statements if they wished. Some declined. Some accepted.

One mother appeared, face pale but eyes fierce.

“I will not pretend I forgive him,” she said. “Not today. Maybe not ever. But I refuse to have my daughter’s memory used to justify cruelty. Do not take her name and build a cage with it. Build something better. If he ever walks free again, I want the world he walks into to be one she would have been proud of.”

A father spoke in a whisper.

“My son was not a forgiving person,” he said, a ghost of a smile flickering at the corner of his mouth. “He would have wanted that boy to suffer. I know this. But my son is not here to grow anymore. I am. Let me be the one who changes. I ask for a sentence that is hard. I ask for a sentence that is human.”

There were also voices that trembled with rage, that demanded banishment, that could not yet conceive of the boy as anything but a monster. The facilitation team held space for them too, without argument, honoring their pain without letting it become policy.

When the time came for the formal decision, the Circle did not pretend to be unanimous.

They did, however, strive to be clear.

A facilitation elder stood in the center of the hall, hands folded.

“After consultation with Assemblies, grief circles, and justice councils,” she said, “and after review of existing frameworks, we propose the following: that the seventeen-year-old in question be given access to full longevity therapies, and that he serve a Long Reflection Sentence of seventy years in a high-structure restorative environment. During this time, he will participate in intensive therapeutic work, education, and meaningful labor. He will have no access to weapons, intoxicants, or unsupervised contact with the broader public. He will, however, have access to mentors, to art, to gardens, to conversation.”

She paused.

“At the end of seventy years,” she continued, “his case will be reviewed. If there is clear evidence of deep transformation and an ongoing commitment to repair, he will be released into a monitored, gradually expanding freedom, with the expectation that he use his remaining centuries of life in service to the Living. If such evidence is absent, the review panel will determine an appropriate extension of structured time, with no option for permanent disappearance from our responsibility.”

Murmurs swept the hall—some relieved, some outraged, some simply stunned.

“This is not mercy instead of justice,” the elder said. “It is justice stretched across a wider horizon than our ancestors could imagine. It is a wager—that given enough time, and the right conditions, even a soul that has done great harm might learn to bend toward the light.”

A vote glyph appeared overhead.

One by one, circles signaled their assent or dissent. The tally rose slowly, agonizingly, visible to all.

In the end, the decision passed—not unanimously, but by a margin that would hold.

The Long Reflection Sentence had become real.

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When Anastasia stepped out of the hall into the late afternoon, the light had shifted.

The sky over the city had blurred into layered gold and violet, the air crisp enough that her breath came in small white puffs. People moved along the walkways and across the bridges with a subdued energy, as if the news of the day had settled on their shoulders without stopping them.

“You are tired,” Zarya observed.

“Yes,” Anastasia said. “But not in the way I feared I might be.”

“How did you fear?”

“That we would choose the old path,” she said. “That we would reach for something that felt like safety and call it justice. That I would recognize the shape of it from my youth and know that we had learned nothing.”

“And now?”

“Now I think we have learned something,” she said slowly. “Not everything. Not enough. But something.”

She leaned on the railing of the walkway, looking down at the river threading through the lower levels of the city. The water caught the fading light, turning it into long, trembling ribbons.

“Where is he now?” she asked.

“In transit,” Zarya said. “He is being taken to a facility in the hills. It was designed for long-term restorative stays. You visited it once, thirty years ago, when it opened.”

“I remember,” she said. “They called it the House of Returning.”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

She watched a tram glide silently along its track, lights blinking a soft pattern as it passed.

“Seventy years,” she murmured. “When I was young, that was almost a full life.”

“Yes,” Zarya said.

“Now it is a chapter,” she said. “A long, hard chapter in a book that continues.”

“Do you believe he will change?” Zarya asked.

Anastasia considered the question.

“I believe he will be given the chance to,” she said. “That is all we can control.”

“Probability estimates—” Zarya began.

“Keep them,” she said gently. “This is not a place for numbers.”

There was a pause.

“Understood,” Zarya said.

Anastasia drew her coat more tightly around herself.

“If I am still alive when his seventy years are done,” she said, surprising herself as she said it, “I would like to be there when he steps out.”

“You will be one hundred and ninety-seven,” Zarya said. “Your projected health metrics suggest that is quite possible.”

“Then remind me,” she said. “On that day.”

“I will,” Zarya replied.

She straightened, letting the last of the sun wash over her face.

Behind her, the hall of justice and restoration buzzed softly as people emerged in small clusters, talking in low voices. Ahead of her, the city carried on—children on scooters, elders on benches, lovers leaning on railings watching the light change.

Seven families would not see their children grow old. A boy who had broken the world open in one morning would spend seventy years learning how to live with the shards.

Between those facts lay the choice they had made: not to throw him away, not to crown him with a cruelty that echoed his own, but to insist that if he was to live long in this world, he would do so facing, again and again, the weight of what he had done—and the possibility of becoming someone who could be trusted with time.

It was not justice as the old world had defined it.

It was justice for a world that had decided, stubbornly, that no one was expendable.

Anastasia turned toward home, the question of time still humming in her chest like a chord not yet resolved—but at least, she thought, now it had somewhere to go.

The sky above the city deepened to indigo, and the first stars flickered on—quiet witnesses to a civilization still learning what to do with its long, fragile, astonishing chance.